

Priest tells his worried parish: Get involved in community, help end violence in Anchorage

Editor's note: Second in a two-part series about gang violence in Anchorage (click here for [story1](#)).

By Kelly DuFort
Anchor Writer

Anxiety about violent crime is growing among parishioners of East Anchorage's St. Anthony Parish, according to pastor Father Fred Bugarin.

St. Anthony as a community has been working on crime prevention for more than two years, but a rash of shootings in the city over the past months has concentrated attention on the phenomenon, and more parishioners are turning to the church for help.

After a recent Mass at St. Anthony, a woman opened her hand to reveal a bullet casing found nearby. Others have told of waking to the sound of gunshots.

They get nervous when young people congregate in the streets at night and they want to know what the church can do to restore peace, Father Bugarin said.

He tells them that as people of faith, they have a duty to respond to the "prophetic call and mission and vocation" to voice their concerns and work for peace, he said.

One way they can do that, according to the pastor, is by partnering with police, municipal leaders and other faith communities through AFACT (Anchorage Faith & Action — Congregations Together).

The community-organizing group is a network of a dozen faith organizations, including St. Anthony Parish, whose members meet one-to-one with parishioners and neighbors in an effort to build relationships and improve the quality of life in the city.

AFACT has twice sponsored public crime-prevention meetings at St. Anthony Church.

Hundreds packed the pews Feb. 2, 2004, to hear from Anchorage Assemblymen, and again March 9, 2005, when Mayor Mark Begich and Police Chief Walt Monegan addressed those gathered.

Another AFACT meeting, held May 17 of this year at Central Lutheran Church, addressed the need for safe, after-school youth activities in West Fairview.

In addition, St. Anthony Parish youths have testified before the municipal assembly against a proposal to cut funding for cops — Student Resource Officers — in their schools.

AFACT has also organized two Clergy/Cops/Kids forums, bringing together pastors, police officers and a group of 25-40 area youths for a frank discussion about racial profiling and public safety.

Father Bugarin said he hopes the youths' input will help police adapt their approach to law enforcement and cultivate a connection between the two groups.

"Whenever there is a dialogue, there is a relationship that is nurtured," Father Bugarin said.

Monegan said he "highly supports" the community partnerships that Clergy/Cops/Kids forums cultivate.

He also said the focus of police is to curb criminal behavior.

"All of us, when we were that age, everyone pushes the envelope somewhat. It's not who or what you are, as much as what you do. Everyone's focus should be on the behavior," not ethnicity or gender, he said.

Community-oriented policing — the crux of AFACT's 2005 public crime prevention meeting — aims to form partnerships between community members and police officers.

At that 2005 gathering, Mayor Begich and Monegan agreed to incorporate the principles of community-oriented policing into the police department's strategic plan.

"It's developing a trust relationship with the youth in the neighborhoods," Father Bugarin said, "not just patrol and enforcement."

A year ago, the municipality established a "Community Youth Violence Gang Response Team," and now, the 11-person team recommends supervising students expelled from school, collaborating with ethnic and minority communities, educating about gang violence, and developing alternatives to gangs, to name a few strategies.

But Father Bugarin said July 18 that he hadn't yet seen the fruition of the promise that city leaders made to hundreds during the crime meeting to implement community-oriented policing.

"We don't see it happening" outside of the School Resource Officer program, the priest said.

One officer was appointed as a community council liaison by the Anchorage Police Department but was called back to headquarters last month.

Monegan said shift patrol officers attempt to attend community council meetings when they can but that the position probably won't be permanently staffed for about another year.

Almost two years ago, a \$50,000 federal grant was awarded for extra policing in Mountain View.

With that money, Monegan said, the department increased "directed patrols" during which officers sought out violence and domestic disturbances and staked out high-crime areas frequented by "gang-bangers."

While the existence of gangs is undeniable, Father Bugarin wondered if maybe gangs are "symptomatic" of greater problems such as a lack of effective parenting or supervision, he said.

In the meantime, the priest said he sees his role as a clergyman as helping people hear the call to put their faith into action.

At all four weekend Masses July 15-16, in the days following a shootout among young football players, Father Bugarin urged parishioners to "speak on behalf of right and justice."

"It's the democratic process," Father Bugarin said. "Together in solidarity, we can certainly move mountains. We're a faith-based organization. That's where our power is."

Police chief Monegan echoed the priest's sentiment.

"They're stepping up to the plate and saying they're a part of this community," he said. "Instead of all these entities speaking individually like solos, now they're going to be spoken in a unified effort and we're all on the same page, all singing the same song."